

#94 - Freezer Meals

Hi there! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. Before we get going on today's episode, I want to make sure you know about my mailing list! Our next monthly email with tons of good things goes out this Wednesday, so if you're not getting those emails, jump on the bandwagon. I share books I loved, podcast episodes you should listen to, an update on all the content from the podcast and the blog that you might have missed, and stuff from me that I don't share anywhere else. A couple of months ago, I shared some huge news in the newsletter that I'll share now even though you might have heard already on Instagram or somewhere, but you guys! I'm writing a book for you! If you've been listening for awhile, you might have heard me mention working on a book proposal and trying new things and taking leaps and all of it. Well, I took a leap, pitched a book, and signed a book contract last fall. I'm currently in the middle of writing the book, and it's crazy and awesome. But I announced details about that in the newsletter back in December, so if you want a monthly hit of Lazy Genius in your inbox (and I promise not to waste your time), head to thelazygeniuscollective.com/join to join today!

Okay, let's jump in to today's episode - it's number 94 The Lazy Genius Guide to Freezer Meals. I get asked about this topic all the time and for good reason. Freezer meals save enormous time and money if you're intentional. That said, there are other ways to save time and money on dinner, so if after this episode, you still feel kind of meh on freezer cooking, just don't do it. There are other ways, so let this one go. Be lazy about it on purpose, and you'll be better off.

So here's how we're going to approach today. I'm going to give you a quick three step process to figure out your freezer meal math so you'll always know how much to cook when you want to stock your freezer, and then we're going to go through The Seven Rules of Freezer Cooking. So first, let's do freezer meal math. You need three pieces of information for your freezer math formula. First thing, decide how many meals you can fit in your freezer at once. This is an important number and takes into account any size freezer. You can make freezer meals even if you only have the freezer on the top of your fridge. So no matter the size of your freezer, decide how many meals you can probably fit in there. Remember you have to fit other stuff, too, so take that into account. If you're unsure, actually open your freezer or freezers and eyeball the space. Take stock of what's already there, look at the bags of fruit for smoothies and the containers of ice cream and all that, and just eyeball in general how many freezer meals you can fit if your freezer is just shy of being maxed out. That's your Freezer Space Number, and that's information piece number one. Freezer Space Number. Next thing, you want your Freezer Dinner Number. Decide how often you want to eat dinner from the freezer over the course of one month. It can be once a month all the way to 8-10 times because you're pulling from it multiple times a week. That's your Freezer Dinner Number. Now you're going to divide your Freezer Space Number by your Freezer Dinner Number, and that's your Freezer Meal Lifespan. Basically how long can your freezer feed you? So because math is hard, let's do an example. If I want to eat a freezer meal about once a week so four times a month and have room for 20 meals, my Freezer Meal Lifespan is 5 months. I can stock five months of meals at a time. Freezer Space Number (20) divided by Freezer Dinner Number (4). If you want to eat from your freezer twice a week or eight times a month and have room for ten meals, your Freezer Meal Lifespan is ten divided by eight which is one and a quarter. So your freezer can feed you for a month and a quarter or for about five weeks when it's full. I'm using months as our timeframe because some of you might not need to eat from the freezer more than once a week, but if you

do, use weeks instead of months. So if you want to eat from the freezer once a week and have space for a dozen meals, you have a Freezer Meal Lifespan of a dozen weeks. Make sense?

Now what do you do with your Freezer Meal Lifespan number? You decide how often you need to cook freezer meals in order to keep your freezer feeding you as often as you want it to. So to keep the math super simple, let's say you want to eat from your freezer once a week and have room for four meals at a time which means your lifespan is four weeks or a month, you now get to decide how often you want to freezer cook. Your Freezer Meal Lifespan tells you the absolute longest span of time you can go without freezer cooking, so in this scenario with a Lifespan number of a month, you can hold one month of meals at a time. That means at a minimum, you need to cook four freezer meals a month to keep it stocked. Now, you get to decide how you want to do that. You can do four meals in one cooking session every month. You can plan one meal a week that's easily doubled and freeze one meal a week to keep you stocked. You can cook a couple of meals every couple of weeks. You see how this works? So how much can your freezer hold? How often will you pull meals from the freezer? Divide the first number by the second number to determine how long your freezer will feed you without needing to be replenished. That's your Freezer Meal Lifespan, and it's the magic number for how you approach freezer meal cooking.

So let's map this out for a larger freezer capacity. I'll use my own freezer numbers. I want one freezer meal a week, and my freezer can hold 15 meals. That's 15 weeks of meals or a little over three months. So I can go three months without making a freezer meal if I do it all at once. I can choose to do a mega freezer session every quarter and freeze all 15 meals. I can do a monthly freezer session where I make about five meals at a time. Or I can do the weekly thing where I plan one meal a week that's easily doubled and frozen and just keep that rhythm forever since I need one freezer meal a week.

I hate talking about math, so I hope all this makes sense. But here's why we need the math. The problem with freezer cooking is that we see those images on Pinterest and different Instagram accounts of people who have these major freezer cooking sessions, and we get overwhelmed. We're not sure if we have room for all of that, we don't have an expectation of how often we'll eat freezer meals, and it feels like we'll do all this work without it actually helping us out.

So if you know how many freezer meals you need a week or a month, if you know how many meals you can fit in your freezer, you can easily figure out how often you need to have a freezer cooking session and how many meals you need to actually make during that freezer cooking session. Then it's actually kind of easy. Deciding what to make is easier because you know how much to make and that you'll actually have room for it.

Now we're going to get into the seven rules of freezer cooking which will shed a little more light on how to put an actual freezer cooking session together.

Rule #1: Don't romanticize it. This is a weird freezer cooking rule, but it's an important one. You see the photos and the stacks of food and pretty labels and all the things, and it feels like if you can do that, you've got your act together. You want to feel as empowered as those Internet women seem to be. Now hear me: having a stocked freezer is empowering, but it doesn't make you superwoman. It doesn't completely eliminate dinner stress. It can absolutely help. It does make a lot of 4:30pm panicky afternoons better. But if you don't have a huge stack of food with completely organized shopping lists and friends to share it with and all the things, you're not

doing it wrong. Don't romanticize it. Freezer cooking is a wonderful tool, but it's not a magic pill or easy in and of itself. I'm selling it so well, right, but I think you know what I mean. It's a helpful tool if you use it the way you need, but it's not magic and perfectly gridded out on your counter ready for an Instagram photo. So rule #1 don't romanticize it.

Rule #2: If you bulk cook, you need a plan. If you bulk cook, you need a plan. A lot of you might be completely happy making one extra meal a week with whatever you have lying around, but if you want to cook ten meals at a time in one fell swoop, you'll lose your mind if you don't have a plan. But now that you know how many meals to make and how often you need to plan a freezer cooking session, that plan will be a lot easier. Here are a couple of ways to approach a bulk plan. Check the Internet for work that's already done. Find one of the million blog posts with freezer session plans or use one of those cookbooks on your shelf that has freezer plans. Simply find a plan that makes the number of meals you need, and let someone else do all the planning work for you.

Now if you don't want to use somebody else's recipes and want to use your own meals, make your own plan. Let's say you want to cook six meals at once, you need to make a plan for six meals. They can be the same recipe six times. You can make double batches of three recipes, triple batches of two recipes, or six separate recipes. Do the math however you want. Next you need to make a grocery list of what you need in order to make that freezer session work. Go ahead and write down all the ingredients and amounts you need for every recipe. After everything is written down, check it against what you already have (and make sure you're not using any of that stuff before your freezer session), and now you have your shopping list. You also need to make sure you have the right containers to freeze your meals in, but we'll get to that in another rule.

And to make your freezer session plan work super well for you, you need to know what tasks you're going to do in what order. Write out the actual cooking you need to do for each recipe. You need to dice onions and grill chicken and whatever your recipes need. You might be using a slow cooker for one recipe, a saute pan for another, the oven for another two... try and think about how you can do all that cooking in the most efficient order. Don't make one recipe and then another and then another or you'll be there forever. This is where someone else's plan will really help you because a lot of times, those plans list the tasks in order and have already done the work of what appliance is being used when. If that kind of decision making doesn't overwhelm you, figure it out yourself. I'm a weirdo who likes that kind of stuff, so I do it myself. But have a plan. Plan your recipes, plan your grocery list so you have every last bit of food you need for your freezer cooking session, and plan the order of tasks in the most efficient order you can find to make the process quicker and easier than if you didn't. So rule #2 if you bulk cook, you need a plan. Yours or someone else's, but have a plan.

Rule #3: Freeze full meals or meal kits. A full meal is something you can thaw all at once, heat up and it's ready. Soup, chili, curry, stuff like that. A meal kit is different. It's a kit of components that are mostly ready to rock but need individual attention. An example of this could be fajitas. You have a little baggie of sliced raw onions and bell peppers, you have another baggie of already grilled steak, and you have a spice packet. Yes, you can freeze spices if that helps. So when it's time for dinner, you pull out your fajita meal kit. You saute the vegetables straight from frozen and then add the already cooked meat to warm up. Then you add the spice packet and a dash of water at the end to bring it all together. So you still had to do a little cooking beyond just heating something up on the stove, but the kit is about as ready to go as it can be. I prefer fully

cooked freezer meals, but know what you prefer and what might serve your recipes best. SO freezer full meals or meal kits. Decide what works for you.

Rule #4: Think about thawing. How are you going to thaw your food? Does it even need thawing? For example, if you're making slow-cooker meals that just need to go in the crockpot straight from the freezer, it might be a great idea to freeze the food in a gallon freezer bag that freezes mostly in the shape of the crockpot bowl. I often freeze things flat in gallon bags so there's more surface area for a quicker thaw, but chili that's frozen flat will not fit in a crockpot. It'll just make you angry to not have things work the way they're supposed to, so think about thawing. Think about the shape of the food compared to the shape of what you're going to cook it in if that's a thing. Think about if the food needs to be completely thawed before it's heated and how quickly that needs to happen. Thicker things thaw much more slowly than thin things, but not everything needs to be thawed. And that's why rule #4 is think about thawing. Just think about what makes the most sense for you and the recipes you choose.

Rule #5: Google it. If you're unsure if something can freeze, google it. If you need some meal kit ideas, google it. If you need the complete plan for a dozen meals, google it. If you wonder how long something is good in the freezer, google it. There's no single answer for your freezer questions, so it's better to google what you need specifically. For example, when we have our Instagram live this week, you might want to ask me how long stuff can last in the freezer, and while I love answering your questions and want to help you as much as I can, there's no one answer for that question. Certain foods last longer than others, so once you have a specific question, google is your best friend. I know it's huge and not as trustworthy as a friend or your mom, but having some place to start still makes a difference. Because once you know what you need, the Internet can be an enormous help because you're not just googling freezer meals. Your'e googling freezer meal plan for six meals. Make friends with the Internet once you know what you need from the relationship.

Rule #6: Label like it's your job. You have to label stuff. It's not just so you know what something is which is definitely true. There's nothing like thawing a bag of reddish stuff, thinking it's chili to find out it's meat sauce and now you have to boil pasta. So yes label so you know what stuff is, but even more than that, label so you can quickly see what you have when you open your freezer. I do this for my fridge a good amount, too. When you open the door to grab something, you can move stuff around and figure out what you have eventually, but the quick decision making you get some labels is hugely important, probably more than you realize. So label such that you can see what stuff is when you open the door. Like I said, I freeze a lot of gallon bags flat and line them up almost like books on a bookshelf. But if I just label the fronts of the bags, I still don't know what I'm looking at when I open the freezer. So you could put a piece of masking tape around the side of the bag to give you a tiny peek at what's in the bag. Make sense? And here's a pro tip: label the container before you put any food in it. Once hot food hits a container, tape doesn't stick as well, and Sharpies don't draw as well. The same is true of food that's cold already in the freezer that you forgot to label. So as much as you can, label before you any food lands in the container. And this isn't a freezer rule I'm going to go into too much, but when it comes to temperature of foods when you freeze them, the colder the food when it goes in the freezer, the better off the food will be, but it's not a deal breaker. You don't want to put piping hot soup directly into the freezer, but it doesn't have to be completely cold to be frozen either. It's cool if it cools to room temperature a little or takes the edge off in the fridge before it goes in the freezer. I usually don't stress about that part too much; just don't stick super hot stuff in the freezer, and you won't get freezer burn hardly at all.

And finally Rule #7: Don't be a freezer hoarder. This is such a sneaky part of having freezer meals. We don't let ourselves use the meals that are there to make our lives easier! We're like "well it's not a super busy night I should probably save that meal for later" and then we stay stressed out over dinner and have an overflowing freezer and sometimes might even have to throw out meals because they've been in there so long. So don't be a freezer hoarder. Once you decide your Freezer Dinner Number, use it. Use your meals that often. That's what they're there for.

Okay, so let's do a recap. We said a lot today. First, freezer math. Figure out how to do a freezer cooking session by figuring out how long your freezer can feed you, and you get that number by knowing how many many meals your freezer can hold and divide that by how often you want to get dinner from your freezer. No more overwhelm over how to do a freezer cooking session because now you know how much to make and how often. And then there are the freezer rules. 1, don't romanticize it. 2, if you bulk cook, have a plan. 3, freeze complete meals or meal kits whichever works best for you. 4, think about thawing. 5, google it. 6, label like it's your job. and 7, don't be a freezer hoarder.

And that's it for today. I hope that this has been a huge encouragement to your freezer cooking life. You can do this with a tiny freezer, a huge freezer, if you're cooking for one, or if you're cooking for ten. Make it work for you with my super weird freezer math. And if you have any questions on figuring this out for yourself, join me on Instagram this Thursday around 12:15pm EST to talk about it! I'll have a post on my feed that morning where you can ask your questions in advance, and I'll get to as many as I can.

And again, please join the mailing list if you haven't yet! I'd love to be email friends, not just podcast friends. Thanks for being here, for taking the time to listen and share and all of it. I'm so grateful for you and your support of this space.

That's all for today! I'm Kendra, and until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't! Bye!